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THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE SLAVE SYSTEM
IN BRITAIN

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE SLAVE SYSTEM IN BRITAIN*

1. THE RISE OF THE SLAVE SYSTEM

In 1562, John Hawkins, financed by a syndicate of London merchants, made his first voyage to Sierra Leone and, trespassing on the Portuguese monopoly, secured, "partly by the sworde and partly by other meanes," 300 Negroes whom he sold profitably in the Spanish colony of Hispaniola. Englishmen now joined the Spaniards, Portuguese, Italians and Germans who had hitherto monopolized the traffic of man-stealing, and a policy was initiated which, for centuries, was to prove the mainstay of Britain's colonial greatness, and highly satisfactory to all but the Negroes.

Hawkins was a slave trader pure and simple, and soon found imitators. To Drake, however, belongs the credit of foreseeing the necessity of a permanent British settlement in the West Indies, admittedly only as a base for his depredations and piracy in Spanish waters. With the settlement of St. Christopher in 1624 and of Barbados in the next year, the British Empire in the West Indies began. The Spanish monopoly was broken and the Caribbean became the cockpit of Tudor, Stuart, Bourbon and Dutch imperialism. Cromwell's "Western Design" and the Navigation Acts, the colonial ambitions of "le grand monarque," Anglo-Dutch rivalry and the Treaty of Breda, all revolved around the West Indies. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the West Indies were to the great powers of Europe what Africa was after the last quarter of the nineteenth.

* Awarded the first history prize of one hundred dollars at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in New Orleans, October 29, 1939.

The capture of undefended Jamaica during the Protectorate was small compensation for the dismal failure of the expedition against the rich and valuable Hispaniola, but was none the less important. Religious quarrels and the vicissitudes of civil war sent numbers of religious and political refugees, Cavaliers, Roundheads, Irish Catholics and Quakers, to people the colonies, and, as in North America, "indentured" servants were sent out as the labor supply. The white man proved unable to endure strenuous labor in the tropical climate and the rise of sugar, the secret of which was learned from the Dutch, who in turn had acquired it from the Portuguese in Brazil, was favorable to the employment of slave labor and turned men's eyes to Africa, the game preserve of labor. The Spanish priest, Las Casas, had set the example of introducing, on the ground of humanity, Negro slaves to spare the lives of the native Indians. Britain bettered the instruction but this time it was whites who were to be saved, though Indian slaves were not unknown in the British colonies. The islands ceased to be a refuge for poor whites and fortune hunters and became dreaded places to which convicts were transported, while the African slave trade became the cardinal object of British colonial policy.

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"It is very probable," says Professor Pitman, "that the production of sugar would not have taken place as soon as it did if slavery had not existed to furnish a sufficiently large and continuous body of labour."¹ The Negro slaves meant as much to the West Indian colonies as steam engines and coal to a modern factory. On the slave trade depended the whole West Indian trade in general and ultimately a very large share of British prosperity. Contemporaries were fully alive to this. Malachy Postlethwayt, a prolific writer on economic subjects and author of many

¹ F. W. Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies, 1700-1763* (New Haven, 1917), p. 62.

tracts on the slave trade, may be taken as a good representative of eighteenth century opinion. To him the Negroes were "the fundamental prop and support" of the colonies, "valuable people" whose labor supplied Britain with all plantation produce.² To Gee "the supplying our plantations with negroes is of the extraordinary advantage to us that the planting sugar and tobacco, and carrying on trade there, could not be supported without them; which plantations . . . are the great causes of the riches of the kingdom."³ The slaves were absolutely indispensable if cultivation was to be maintained; "as they were the first happy instruments of raising our plantations; so their labour only can support and preserve them, and render them still more and more profitable to their Mother Kingdom."⁴ Increased importation of Negroes meant increased shipping, which provided a nursery for seamen and contributed to the naval power of Britain. The West Indian trade was "a trade of such essential and allowed concernment to the wealth and naval power of Great Britain" that it seemed to Postlethwayt as impertinent to expatiate on it as to declaim on the common benefits of air and sunshine;⁵ the Negro trade was "of a most prodigious consequence,"⁶ and, with the natural consequences resulting from it, could justly be deemed "an inexhaustible fund of wealth and naval power."⁷

The economic theory of the day aimed at a self-sufficing empire. According to this theory, colonies were useful if they procured for the mother country a greater consumption of home productions; if they occupied a greater num-

² M. Postlethwayt, *The African Trade, the Great Pillar and Support of the British Plantation Trade in North America* (London, 1745), pp. 4, 6.

³ Quoted in J. F. Rees, "The Phases of British Commercial Policy in the Eighteenth Century" (*Economica*, June, 1925), p. 142.

⁴ Postlethwayt, *The National and Private Advantages of the African Trade Considered* (London, 1746), p. 2.

⁵ Postlethwayt, *The African Trade, the Great Pillar and Support*, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, title page.

⁷ Postlethwayt, *The National and Private Advantages*, p. 2.

ber of her manufacturers, fishermen and seamen; if they provided her with a greater supply of raw materials and with a superfluity for export to other nations.⁸ By this touchstone the West Indies were ideal colonies. They produced goods which Britain could not supply. There was little temptation, by reason of their climate, to establish manufactures which would compete with those at home, though strict mercantilists were quick to resent the tendency of the colonies to refine their own sugar as detrimental to the interests of the sugar refiners at home.⁹ Their black population was a guarantee against pretensions to independence.¹⁰ The West Indies compared very favorably with the East Indies, the trade of which was the source of some misgivings. East Indian trade withdrew bullion from the mother country, it took off little British manufactures, and, much worse, threatened to introduce cheap textiles which would swamp those of the mother country. The introduction of these textiles had to be forbidden, except for re-export, and the East India Company found a valuable alternative market in Africa where it threatened Lancashire's monopoly. Indian cotton goods formed a regular item of the cargoes with which slaves were purchased, and yet another vested interest was drawn in on the side of the slave trade. The West Indian trade, on the other hand, withdrew no bullion from Britain. The slaves were paid for in British manufactures and all their produce went to make the balance of trade, a conception dear to the hearts of eighteenth century men, favorable to Britain. Postlethwayt could truly describe the West Indian trade as one which was "all profit to the nation,"¹¹ peculiarly Britain's own foreign trade, as much under her direction and control

⁸ Postlethwayt, *Great Britain's Commercial Interest Explained and Improved* (London, 1759), I, 153.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁰ Postlethwayt, *The African Trade, the Great Pillar and Support*, pp. 13-14.

¹¹ Postlethwayt, *The National and Private Advantages*, p. 3.

as the trade of Ireland and Scotland.¹² The West Indians were taught for over a century how valuable they were to their mother country, how essential to its opulence and supremacy, and it was a lesson which many of them were never able to unlearn.

* * * * *

The British slave trade had existed before the establishment of British colonies in the West Indies, and in the "golden age" Britain was greatly concerned with the lucrative slave trade to the foreign colonies. She had long looked with covetous eyes at the Asiento or monopoly enjoyed by the French of supplying the Spanish colonies, the decadent Spanish imperialism being unable to do so, and in 1689 she signed a convention with Spain for supplying the Spanish West Indies with slaves from Jamaica. One of the most important and most popular clauses of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 was the transfer of the Asiento from France to Britain. By this treaty Britain secured the right of supplying 144,000 Negroes in 30 years, or 4,800 per annum; of supplying a greater number annually during the first 25 years on payment of moderate duties; of entering Spanish ports hitherto excluded; and of sending one ship a year of 500 tons to the South Seas. The Government of the day emphasized the importance of the clauses relating to Negroes, which would pay the costs of the war, while the annual ship provided a basis for the large smuggling trade in manufactured goods to the Spanish colonies then ardently coveted by both French and British manufacturers.

The monopoly of the slave trade had originally been vested in the Royal African Company. The planters, however, complained that the supply was so inadequate that the monopoly tended to increase the price. The monopoly was abolished, therefore, in 1698, and the trade thrown open to all British subjects, while a further blow was struck at the Company in 1713 by bestowing the Asiento on the South

¹² Postlethwayt, *The African Trade, the Great Pillar and Support*, p. 43.

Sea Company. The African Company, as a result, rapidly declined; by 1740 it was bankrupt, its debts were estimated at £100,000, and Postlethwayt, its admirer, advocated a renewal of its monopoly and an annual parliamentary grant of £30,000 for fourteen years to restore confidence.¹³

But the British planters found themselves no better off under free trade than under monopoly. Foreign planters were now competing with them for the slaves which were so badly needed and the prices consequently rose. While the foreign planters paid in ready cash, the British, even in these days of prosperity, asked for long credits. The result was that the British had to be content with the worst slaves, while the choicest and physically superior Negroes were sold to the French and Spaniards. This was one of the main reasons for the slow progress made by Jamaica with all its uncultivated land,¹⁴ and Postlethwayt bitterly condemned the Asiento as scandalous and ruinous: "a treaty," he wrote, "could scarce have been contrived of so little benefit to the nation."¹⁵ Postlethwayt went too far, but this is the first hint that the interests of slave merchants and slave owners might not always be identical. The maintenance of Britain's sugar colonies would one day prove incompatible with the policy by which Britain was supplying her rivals with the means of competing with her own colonies.

What with supplying her own colonies and those of her rivals, Britain's slave trade increased enormously. Whereas in 1680-1688 the African Company introduced just over 5,000 slaves annually into the British colonies, from 1698-1708 nearly 11,000 slaves were introduced annually by the Company and private traders.¹⁶ In 1720, 146 ships sailed

¹³ Postlethwayt, *Great Britain's Commercial Interest*, II, 148-149, 236; *The African Trade, the Great Pillar and Support*, pp. 38-39; *The National and Private Advantages*, pp. 113, 122.

¹⁴ Pitman, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-83, 88.

¹⁵ Postlethwayt, *Great Britain's Commercial Interest*, II, 149-151, 154-155, 479-480.

¹⁶ Pitman, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

from British ports, five-sixths of these from London, Bristol and Liverpool, to Africa, capable of holding 36,050 slaves.¹⁷ According to a parliamentary inquiry in 1728, 42,000 Negroes were imported in three years into Barbados, Jamaica and Antigua only.¹⁸ In a discussion in Parliament in 1750 upon the methods of making the trade more effective, it was shown that 46,000 Negroes were annually sold to the British colonies alone. Between 1752 and 1762, 71,115 Negroes were imported into Jamaica; the total importation into the island from 1703 to 1776 was 496,893. Rodney reported in 1762 that 40,000 Negroes had been introduced into Guadeloupe in the three years during which it was in British possession. Between 1680 and 1786 it has been estimated that the total import of slaves into all the British American colonies was over two million or an average of 20,000 a year. The peak year was 1768, when 104,100 slaves were taken from Africa, over fifty per cent by British traders.¹⁹

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II. THE WEALTH FROM THE SLAVE SYSTEM

The slave system brought immense wealth to Britain; on it everything depended. "If we revolve in our minds," wrote a pamphleteer in 1763, "what an amazing variety of trades receive their daily support, as many of them did originally their being, from the calls of the African and West India markets . . . we may from thence form a competent idea of the prodigious value of our sugar colonies, and a just conception of their immense importance to the

¹⁷ *Some Matters of Fact Relating to the Present State of the African Trade* (London, 1720), p. 3.

¹⁸ Savary des Bruslons, *The Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*. With large additions and improvements by M. Postlethwayt (London, 1751), II, 766. Postlethwayt devoted twenty years to this translation.

¹⁹ W. E. H. Lecky, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1892-1920), II, 243-244; F. W. Pitman, "Slavery on the British West India Plantations in the Eighteenth Century" (*Journal of Negro History*, October, 1926), p. 592; Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies*, pp. 69-70.

grandeur and prosperity of this their mother country.”²⁰ Lancashire’s foreign market meant chiefly the West Indian plantations and the slave trade. The export trade increased from £14,000 in 1739 to £109,000 in 1759 and £303,000 in 1779. Of this the slave trade absorbed about one-third until 1770, when Indian competition began to make itself felt, and the American and West Indian colonies about one-half.²¹ So reliable a writer as Sir Josiah Child wrote that every Englishman in Barbados or Jamaica created employment for four men at home, and a Jamaican proprietor in 1745 estimated the annual consumption of British manufactures by each slave at £1.²² Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield and other centers of industry grew great on manufacturing the wares required for the purchase of slaves, cheap cotton goods, trinkets, and the more sinister necessities, firearms, chains, irons, etc. Truly was the trade to Africa “the first principle and foundation of all the rest, the mainspring of the machine which sets every wheel in motion.”²³

But it is in the spectacular rise of Liverpool that the importance of the slave system is most clearly seen. In the seventeenth century Bristol and London had practically monopolized the slave trade. When in 1708 the first slave trader left Liverpool for the slave coast, her geographical position soon made her a formidable rival. The account of the wealth to be obtained operated like electricity, and by 1720 Liverpool had 21 ships in the trade as compared with Bristol’s 39 and London’s 60.²⁴ The trade was triangular. Liverpool shipped a cargo of Lancashire cottons to West Africa, exchanged it for slaves, took the slaves to the West Indies, and there turned them into a cargo of cotton, sugar

²⁰ J. Campbell, *Candid and Impartial Observations on the Nature of the Sugar Trade* (London, 1763), pp. 25-26.

²¹ A. S. Turberville, *Johnson’s England* (Oxford, 1933), I, 231-232.

²² Pitman, *Slavery on the British West India Plantations*, pp. 585, footnote, and 607.

²³ Quoted in Rees, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

²⁴ *Some Matters of Fact*, p. 3.

and tobacco for Britain. The history of the century is the story of the supremacy of Liverpool and the decline of her rivals. It was a preoccupation with other matters, the tobacco trade and the smuggling trade to the Spanish colonies, and no moral scruple which had restrained Liverpool from stooping to conquer in the race for commercial greatness, and from participating in a trade in which every seaport from Gottenburg to Cadiz was engaged. No more scruple was then felt as to the lawfulness of the slave trade than as to the lawfulness of the trade in black cattle.²⁵

The abolitionist Clarkson was later to attribute the rapid rise of Liverpool to a variety of causes, the salt trade, the prodigious increase of the population of Lancashire, and the very rapid and great extension of the manufactures of Manchester.²⁶ But there can be no doubt that it was the slave trade which raised Liverpool from a struggling port to one of the richest and most prosperous trading centers of the world. By adopting a policy of cutting down expenses to the bare minimum, the Liverpool traders were able to sell their "prime" Negroes at from four to five pounds less per head than the merchants of London or Bristol, and Liverpool soon gained the distinction of being the chief slaving town of the Old World. In 1752, 88 vessels sailed from the port to Africa, 87 of these for slaves, with a capacity, if not overcrowded, for 25,000 slaves,²⁷ and twelve years later the slave trade occupied more than one-fourth of its shipping, representing one-half of the African trade of the whole kingdom.²⁸ In 1771, of 190 slave ships which left Britain, 107 were from Liverpool; during the period 1750-1776, 588 vessels sailed from Bristol to Africa, as com-

²⁵ T. Baines, *History of the Commerce and the Town of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1852), p. 694.

²⁶ T. Clarkson, *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (London 1788), pp. 123-125.

²⁷ G. Williams, *History of the Liverpool Privateers, with an Account of the Liverpool Slave Trade* (Liverpool, 1897), p. 472.

²⁸ J. Wallace, *A General and Descriptive History of the Ancient and Present State of the Town of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1795), p. 217.

pared with 1,868 from Liverpool.²⁹ Fast sailing vessels, specially adapted for the trade, were built in the yards on the banks of the Mersey, and the odor of the human shambles mixed with the tar and rum in the docks.³⁰ It was said that several of the principal streets had been marked out by the chains of Africans,³¹ one street was nicknamed "Negro Row,"³² and the story is told of an actor in the town who, hissed by the audience for appearing, not for the first time, in a drunken condition, steadied himself and declared with offended majesty: "I have not come here to be insulted by a set of wretches, every brick in whose infernal town is cemented with an African's blood."³³

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"There were comparatively few big merchants in Great Britain in 1761," writes Professor Namier, "who, in one connection or other, did not trade with the West Indies, and a considerable number of gentry families had interests in the Sugar Islands, just as vast numbers of Englishmen now hold shares in Asiatic rubber or tea plantations or oil fields."³⁴ It was to the slave system that many individuals were indebted for the fortunes that they made—either as planters, slave traders, or as merchants who carried the produce of slave labor to Britain or sent out to the West Indies the goods needed on the plantations. William Miles of Bristol was typical of many other cases. Miles came to Bristol with three half-pence in his pocket, worked as a porter, apprenticed himself to a ship builder, saved fifteen pounds and sailed to Jamaica as a ship's carpenter in a merchantman. He bought a cask or two of sugar which he sold in Bristol at a huge profit, and with the proceeds

²⁹ Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies*, p. 67.

³⁰ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 473.

³¹ J. Corry, *The History of Lancashire* (London, 1825), p. 690.

³² H. Smithers, *Liverpool, Its Commerce, Statistics and Institutions* (Liverpool, 1825), p. 105.

³³ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 594.

³⁴ L. B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929), I, 210.

bought articles in greatest demand in Jamaica and repeated his former investment. Miles soon became very wealthy, settled in Bristol, took his son into partnership, gave him a cheque for £100,000 to enable him to marry the daughter of an aristocratic clergyman, became an alderman, and died rich and honored. His son continued as a West Indian merchant dealing chiefly in sugar and slaves, and died in 1848 leaving property valued at more than one million.³⁵

Other men may not have been as spectacular in their career as William Miles, but they prospered none the less. Bryan Blundell rose rapidly from apprentice to master of a ship engaged in the West Indian trade, and made an honorable place for himself among the prosperous merchants of Liverpool.³⁶ Foster Cunliffe, also of Liverpool, gained wealth in the tobacco trade, and with his sons became a pioneer in the more remunerative slave trade; together they had four ships capable of holding 1,120 slaves, the profits of which were sufficient to stock twelve vessels on the homeward journey with rum and sugar.³⁷ John Earle, to cite another example, from an iron-monger's shop gravitated, also with his sons, into the slave trade, where he amassed a large fortune,³⁸ while the Heywood family were slave traders and were among the first to import the slave-grown cotton of the United States.³⁹ David Barclay the elder, one of the most influential merchants of his time in London, began his career in American and West Indian commerce. He was not merely a slave trader but actually owned a great plantation in Jamaica where, we are told, he freed his slaves, and lived to find that "the black skin enclosed

³⁵ H. R. F. Bourne, *English Merchants, Memoirs in Illustration of the Progress of British Commerce* (London, 1866), II, 17-18; J. B. Botsford, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century as Influenced from Oversea* (New York, 1924), p. 120.

³⁶ Botsford, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

³⁷ Bourne, *op. cit.*, II, 57; Botsford, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

³⁸ Bourne, *op. cit.*, II, 64; Botsford, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

³⁹ Bourne, *op. cit.*, II, 64, 78; Botsford, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

hearts full of gratitude and minds as capable of improvement as the proudest white.”⁴⁰

But the prince of all West Indians in the eighteenth century was William Beckford. An ancestor had died fighting for his king on Bosworth Field, and it was left to another, Peter, to resuscitate the family fortunes after the conquest of Jamaica. Peter soon became the most distinguished of the new colonists, was appointed President of the Council by Charles II and Lieutenant-Governor and Commander-in-Chief by William III, and died in 1710 possessed of an immense extent of property. His son became Speaker of the Assembly, and William, in 1737, inherited the family wealth. He was the most influential West Indian merchant of his day, rose to the position of member of Parliament for the City of London, became an alderman, and was twice Lord Mayor. His civic entertainments were the most magnificent ever given. On one occasion, at a banquet at which there were 600 dishes, costing £10,000, six dukes, two marquises, twenty-three earls, four viscounts, and fourteen barons of the Upper House joined the members of the Commons and went in procession to the City to honor him. Macaulay, in his essay on Chatham, has left us an unflattering portrait of the man, “a noisy, purse-proud, illiterate demagogue, whose Cockney English and scraps of mispronounced Latin were the jest of the newspapers.” Contemporaries would generally have endorsed the verdict. His absurdities were rendered more conspicuous by his vanity. Vainglory seemed to Walpole to be the real motive of his actions. When he heard of the destruction of his mansion at Fonthill by fire he wrote laconically to his steward, “let it be rebuilt.” When Lord Holland told him that he had sent his ailing son to Richmond for the air, Beckford remarked, “Oh! Richmond is the worst place in the world; I lost twelve natural children there last year!”

⁴⁰ Bourne, *op. cit.*, II, 134-135; Botsford, *op. cit.*, p. 295. For Barclay's slave trading see A. T. Gary, *The Political and Economic Relations of English and American Quakers, 1750-1785* (Oxford D.Phil. Thesis, copy in Friends' House, London), pp. 194, 221, 506.

Beckford had one all-important redeeming virtue: by reason of his wealth he had great influence in the City. Chatham was his staunch friend and his election as Mayor was a mark of the City's good-will to Chatham. The day before Beckford's death, Chatham took care to force his way into his house and take away all the letters he had written to him. The origin of Beckford's wealth did not prevent him from being the champion of Wilkes and constitutional liberty. To Walpole he was a "noisy vapouring fool"; he rather than Wilkes was the real firebrand of politics. Beckford will always remain famous for a forceful and eloquent extempore speech which, contrary to all precedent, he made in reply to the King's answer to a remonstrance from the City concerning the treatment of Wilkes. The speech made George III redden, the courtiers were scandalized at the innovation, and Beckford was ever after unwelcome at Court. A splendid monument was erected to him in the Guildhall, with his speech graven in letters of gold on the pedestal. He died in 1770, leaving his son William property yielding £100,000 a year, besides one million in cash, which the latter did not scruple to increase by embezzling £40,000 from the endowments in trust left by Jamaicans for the education of their children.⁴¹

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The wealth acquired in the West Indies encouraged absentee proprietorship. Beckford once argued that nobody could be expected to spend his life in the disagreeable climate of the West Indies without the inducement of a hand-

⁴¹ Bourne, *op. cit.*, II, 135 n; A. S. Turberville, *English Men and Manners in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1926), pp. 130, 132; J. Britton, *Graphical and Literary Illustrations of Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire, with Heraldical and Genealogical Notices of the Beckford Family* (London, 1823), pp. 62-63; *The Georgian Era* (London, 1832), I, 537; C. De Thierry, "Colonials at Westminster" (*United Empire*, January, 1912), pp. 80-81; H. Walpole, *Memoirs of the Reign of King George the Third* (London, 1845), I, 159, IV, 154-157; P. Cunningham (ed.), *The Letters of Horace Walpole* (London, 1891), V, 248, 252. For a replica of the monument to Beckford and his speech, see *Guide to the Guildhall of the City of London* (London, 1927), pp. 58-59.

some fortune. This was nonsense. His fortune made, the slave owner returned to Britain. Owners of plantations looked on the colonies only as a temporary exile, from which they were anxious to remove as soon as they acquired sufficient wealth to enable them to support a certain rank in the parent state. "Whenever any person has made his fortune," wrote a pamphleteer in 1740, "he seldom fails to transport his family and effects to England."⁴² The danger of this policy did not pass unnoticed. In 1753 the fear was expressed that the speedy accumulation of wealth might prove pernicious to the planters themselves, by promoting idleness and extravagance, by encouraging them to abandon their plantations to attorneys and stewards, and by making the disproportion between whites and blacks greater than it already was.⁴³

Bryan Edwards, the planter-historian of the West Indies, was later to deny that his fellows were remarkable for gigantic opulence or an ostentatious display of it. Undoubtedly there were not in the West Indies the opportunities for dishonesty and plunder that existed in the East. The slave owners were plodders in comparison with the nabobs. There were no native princes in whose intrigues they could take part, to their profit and glorification; there were no opportunities of speculation such as enabled Thomas Rumbold, who had risen from waiter at White's to Governor of Madras, to amass £164,000 in three years, and Hastings to acquire a fortune estimated between £80,000 and £130,000. The slave owners, who had to wait for the cultivation and sale of their produce, must have looked enviously at the land from which men returned "incrusted with gold and

⁴² Cit. Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies*, p. 34.

⁴³ *An Account of the Late Application to Parliament from the Sugar Refiners, Grocers, etc., of the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, and of the City of Bristol* (London, 1753), pp. 45-46. In Jamaica, in 1787, the ratio of slaves to all whites was 10:1, the ratio of slaves to whites able to bear arms 22:1.

diamonds," as Horace Walpole put it,⁴⁴ and from which Clive, with surprising moderation, could bring back to Britain in 1760 a million for himself, two diamond drops worth £12,000 for the Queen, and a scimitar, dagger and other articles covered with brilliants, for the King, worth £24,000 or more.⁴⁵

Yet in the golden age of slavery the East as a part of the Empire could not compete with the West, and the wealth of the West Indies became a legend and a byword. Adam Smith pointed out that the tobacco colonies on the mainland sent home no such wealthy planters as frequently arrived from the sugar islands.⁴⁶ Communities of opulent West Indians were to be found in London and coastal cities like Southampton and Bristol. The memorial plaques and tablets in All Saints' Church, Southampton, are eloquent evidence of the social position they once enjoyed.⁴⁷ In 1778, according to Lord Shelburne, there were scarcely ten miles together throughout the country where the house and rich estate of a West Indian were not to be seen. In proposing the income tax of 1798 Pitt estimated the value of incomes derived from the West Indies at £4,000,000 as opposed to £1,000,000 from the rest of the world.⁴⁸ The public schools, Eton, Westminster, Harrow and Winchester, were full of the sons of West Indians.⁴⁹ Contrary to what their champion has said, the absentees ostentatiously displayed their wealth and entertained handsomely. Their carriages were so numerous that, when they gathered, Londoners complained that the streets for some distance were blocked.⁵⁰ The story is told of how, on a visit to Weymouth,

⁴⁴ Walpole, *Letters*, VIII, 360. Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, April 30, 1783.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, V, 55. Walpole to Sir H. Mann, July 20, 1767.

⁴⁶ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1796 edition), Book I, Chap. XI, Part I, p. 246.

⁴⁷ L. J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean*, 1763-1833 (New York, 1928), pp. 51.

⁴⁸ J. H. Rose, *William Pitt and the Great War* (London, 1911), p. 370.

⁴⁹ Pearl, *Hist.*, XXXIV, 1102. Duke of Clarence, July 5, 1799.

⁵⁰ Ragatz, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

George III and Pitt encountered a wealthy Jamaican with an imposing equipage, including out-riders and livery. George III, much displeased, is reported to have said, "Sugar, sugar eh?—all *that* sugar! How are the duties, eh, Pitt, how are the duties?"⁵¹ Epsom at times reminded visitors of an East Indian factory, at others of a West Indian plantation,⁵² and Cobbett spoke of Cheltenham as the haunt of English tax-gatherers, West Indian floggers and East Indian plunderers.⁵³

The West Indians used their wealth to buy country estates and build luxurious houses. The Beeston Long mansion in Bishopsgate street, which later became part of the London Tavern, and the Robert Hibbert residence just outside the city, sold later when West Indian property declined, were two of the most outstanding.⁵⁴ Lord Farnborough, himself one of the Long family, built Bromley Hill Place in Kent, one of the most famous mansions of England, noted for its wonderful ornamental gardens.⁵⁵ Philip Miles, son of William Miles, bought Leigh Court, but the old Elizabethan home which had concealed Charles I after the battle of Worcester proved too small for the merchant whose wealth was derived from the toil of slaves. He replaced it by a larger building and, in addition, was able to afford other estates in Somersetshire.⁵⁶

But as Beckford was the prince of West Indian merchants, so Fonthill Mansion, which he built on his estate in Wiltshire, testified most eloquently to the wealth derived from slave labor. Long regarded as the most attractive and splendid seat in the west of England, it is worth describing in detail. "It was a handsome uniform edifice,

⁵¹ Ragatz, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁵² Botsford, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁵³ Quoted in A. Ponsonby, *English Diaries* (London, 1923), pp. 284-285.

⁵⁴ Ragatz, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁵⁵ C. De Thierry, "Distinguished West Indians in England" (*United Empire*, October, 1912), p. 831.

⁵⁶ Bourne, *op. cit.*, II, 18.

consisting of a centre of four stories, and two wings of two stories, connected by corridors, built of fine stone, and adorned with a bold portico, resting on a rustic basement, with two sweeping flights of steps: its apartments were numerous, and splendidly furnished. They displayed the riches and luxury of the east; and on particular occasions were superbly brilliant and dazzling. Whilst its walls were adorned with the most costly works of art, its sideboards and cabinets presented a gorgeous combination of gold, silver, precious metals, and precious stones, arranged and worked by the most tasteful artists and artisans. Added to these splendours, these dazzling objects, apparently augmented and multiplied by large costly mirrors, was a vast, choice, and valuable library . . . Some idea may be formed of the extent, etc., of the house by the measurement of its great entrance hall, in the basement story, which was eighty-five feet ten inches in length, by thirty-eight feet six inches in breadth. Its roof was vaulted, and supported by large stone piers. One apartment was fitted up in the Turkish style, with large mirrors, ottomans, etc., whilst others were enriched with fine sculptured marble chimney-pieces." Sad to relate, however, the palatial mansion was built in an unhealthy situation, on the margin of a broad lake, and at the base of a hill covered with woods. Its proprietor doomed it to fall, and the materials alone fetched £10,000.⁵⁷

Not to be outdone, Beckford junior added further to Britain's indebtedness to the wretched slaves. The author of the extravaganza, "Vathek," on which such fame as he is said to enjoy rests, possessed of a vivid fancy and a vast fortune, could not, the family historian assures us, be satisfied with anything commonplace. He desired novelty, grandeur, complexity and even sublimity. The result was Fonthill Abbey, the foundations of which were laid in 1795, and the construction of which provided employment for a

⁵⁷ Britton, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

vast number of mechanics and laborers, even a new village being built to accommodate some of the settlers. Built in secret, access being denied even princes and dukes, the Abbey witnessed a novel scene in the winter of 1800 when 500 workmen, working day and night, by the light of lamps and torches, hastened to complete it for a visit from the hero of the Nile. The Abbey grounds were in one section planted with every species of American flowering shrub and tree, growing in all their native wildness. Beckford, unfortunately, lived to see West Indian glories fade and its strength decay; owing to the depreciation of colonial produce, a considerable part of the valuable contents of the Abbey were put up for sale in 1822.⁵⁸

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It was overseas trade which made Britain great in the eighteenth century. It has been suggested by one writer, with some truth, that Pitt or Chatham, Gladstone or Balfour would never have been heard of but for the wealth their immediate ancestors brought home from the Indies.⁵⁹ The greater part of this wealth came from the West Indies. A common accusation against Negroes is that they show insufficient gratitude for the blessings conferred on them by a mother country repentant. The boot is on the other foot. It is the mother country which is guilty of ingratitude to the descendants of those Negro slaves on whom depended the greatness and wealth of Britain.

The wealth from the slave system was not entirely used to satisfy the vanity of its possessors. It was the profits from West Indian commerce which established some of the leading banking houses of the time and which went to finance the Industrial Revolution in Britain. The Barclays were famous as bankers.⁶⁰ The Heywoods further increased their profits from the importation of slave-grown produce by becoming bankers. Arthur Heywood turned banker in 1774

⁵⁸ Britton, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-28, 35, 39.

⁵⁹ De Thierry, *Distinguished West Indians in England*, p. 831.

⁶⁰ Botsford, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-121; Bourne, *op. cit.*, II, 134.

and founded the bank of Arthur Heywood, Sons, and Company. His brother Benjamin followed his example in 1788 and the banking firm of Benjamin Heywood, Sons and Company was well known in Manchester for many years. It is interesting that eleven of fourteen Heywood descendants up to 1815 became either merchants or bankers.⁶¹ Similarly, in 1801 William Miles bought a leading partnership in the old banking house of Vaughan, Barker and Company, which thenceforth occupied the foremost place in Bristol banking.⁶²

In an age when British industry was being revolutionised much of the money which financed the industrial transformation came, therefore, in the last analysis, from slave labor. But the connection between slave derived wealth and British industry is more definite still. Liverpool's wealth from the slave trade flowed into the hinterland to finance textile production, improve transport facilities and make modern Lancashire.⁶³ It was Miles' wealth as a merchant which enabled him to turn his attention to sugar refining. He became the leading sugar refiner of Bristol; others followed his example until in 1799 there were twenty refiners in the town, refining more sugar than London in proportion to extent and population, while Bristol's proximity to coal enabled it to sell cheaper than London.⁶⁴ Richard Pennant, first Lord Penrhyn, Chairman of the West India Committee at the end of the eighteenth century, devoted his commercial fortune to the development of his slate quarries on "Snowdonia," and thus out of the profits of slave labor brought to North Wales the Industrial Revolution.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Botsford, *op. cit.*, p. 122; Bourne, *op. cit.*, II, 78-79.

⁶² Bourne, *op. cit.*, II, 18.

⁶³ Turberville, *Johnson's England*, I, 231.

⁶⁴ Bourne, *op. cit.*, II, 17-18; Botsford, *op. cit.*, pp. 120, 123; *The New Bristol Guide* (Bristol, 1799), p. 70.

⁶⁵ C. R. Fay, *Imperial Economy and Its Place in the Formation of Economic Doctrine, 1600-1932* (Oxford, 1934), p. 32.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SUGAR INTEREST

So far the West Indian contribution to Britain's place in the sun had been looked on with approval, if with envy, by the ruling classes of the mother country. The harmonious relations were soon disturbed. The eighteenth century was the classic age of parliamentary corruption and electoral venality. At a time when many boroughs, like the more famous Queen's Crawley, had "come down to that condition . . . which used to be denominated rotten," money rather than birth was the important factor. "I always votes for Mr. Most," said a Honiton elector to Lord Dundonald.⁶⁶ The landed interest soon found itself struggling for its life against two powerful corporations deriving enormous wealth from overseas trade in the East and West.

Here again the West Indians were outdistanced by their Eastern rivals, the demoralizing influence of whose wealth is so well illustrated by Gillray's savage cartoon in 1788, in which the King and Queen and dignitaries of Church and State are depicted scrambling for rupees.⁶⁷ But the West Indian power was a formidable one, as the complaints of the landowners testify. As early as 1737 there were two West Indians in Parliament, one of them Sir W. Codrington, whose grandson was to earn an undying name for himself in the sacred cause of Greek independence by his victory of Navarino.⁶⁸ Complaints were raised by the landed gentry about the elections of 1741, and Horace Walpole has left us a graphic picture of political corruption as exemplified in the elections of 1761: "West Indians, conquerors, nabobs and admirals attacked every borough." There were no fewer than nine candidates at Andover, Sudbury shamelessly advertised itself for sale, and Walpole implored his countrymen to "think of two hundred men of

⁶⁶ R. B. Powell, *Eighteenth Century London Life* (London, 1937), p. 123.

⁶⁷ Turberville, *English Men and Manners*, p. 133.

⁶⁸ De Thierry, *Colonials at Westminster*, p. 80.

the most consummate virtue, setting themselves to sale for three weeks.’’⁶⁹ Boroughs were rated on the Royal Exchange like stocks and tallies, the price of a vote was as well known as that of an acre of land.⁷⁰

This competition for seats forced up the price enormously. The country gentlemen, said Bolingbroke, were “vexed, put to great expenses, and even baffled by them at their elections.”⁷¹ Bitter complaints were heard in Parliament about the growing cost of elections; according to the Earl of Dorset a great number of persons had no other livelihood than that of being employed in bribing corporations;⁷² and in 1767 Chesterfield was laughed to scorn when he offered £2,500 for a seat for which, he was told, a West Indian or East Indian would offer £4,000 or £5,000.⁷³ In 1753 no less than three brothers of the Beckford family sat in Parliament, William for London, the other two for Bristol and Salisbury, while a fourth was intended for a Wiltshire borough.⁷⁴ Dr. Johnson deplored the decay of respect for men of family and permanence, and the willingness to sell political power for gold.⁷⁵ Power, in Swift’s phrase, which, according to an old maxim, used to follow land, had now gone over to money.⁷⁶ As Chatham expressed it, the importers of foreign gold had forced their way into Parliament by such a torrent of private corruption as no private hereditary fortune could resist.⁷⁷ It seemed as if the New World had been called into existence to upset the balance of the Old. Many a landowner must have echoed in the

⁶⁹ Walpole, *Letters*, III, 379. Walpole to Sir. H. Mann, March 3, 1761.

⁷⁰ Lecky, *op. cit.*, I, 251.

⁷¹ Quoted in Lecky, I, 250-251.

⁷² Botsford, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

⁷³ Turberville, *English Men and Manners*, p. 134.

⁷⁴ L. M. Penson, *The Colonial Agents of the British West Indies* (London, 1924), p. 195.

⁷⁵ Botsford, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Lecky, *op. cit.*, I, 250.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Botsford, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

silence of his heart Cromwell's public prayer to the Lord to deliver him from Sir Hary Vane.⁷⁸

The Landed Property Qualification Bill of 1712 was an act of self-defense on the part of the landed aristocracy, and, strangely enough, a West Indian, Beckford, introduced a bill against bribery at elections, which Grenville supported, we are told, "to flatter the country-gentlemen, who can ill afford to combat with great lords, nabobs, commissaries and West Indians."⁷⁹

One incident will serve to illustrate the envy and dislike which the sugar planters were beginning to incur. It had been proposed, in order to finance the Spanish war of 1739, to increase the duty on sugar. James Knight, a well-known planter, wrote from Jamaica that, were the new duty passed, "adieu to all new settlements." The West Indian case was sent to every member of Parliament and published in the *Evening Post*, and no effort was spared "to make the clamour popular, and if possible to get this d—d Bill as much abhorred" as Walpole's Excise Scheme.⁸⁰ The West Indians succeeded but the necessity of financing the Seven Years' War revived the project. By that time the planters had begun to usurp the representation of too many boroughs, the House of Commons was vindictive, and there was a strong feeling in the City against them. A landowner, Vernon, put the issue simply: he would vote for the tax "because they would otherwise be for raising a new tax upon the people here, which would affect himself, and . . . his shirt was near him but his skin was nearer." Beckford began to defend the planters in Parliament, but was interrupted by horse-laughs every time he uttered the word

⁷⁸ Sir Harry Vane was not a West Indian, but he was the first Englishman in Parliament who "owed something of his fame to the practical experience and width of outlook he gained in Britain oversea." De Thierry, *Colonials at Westminster*, p. 80.

⁷⁹ Walpole, *Memoirs of the Reign of George the Third*, III, 159.

⁸⁰ L. M. Penson, "The London West India Interest in the Eighteenth Century" (*English Historical Review*, July, 1921), pp. 379-380.

"sugar." Chatham tried in vain to stem the tide of malice: "he should ever consider the colonies as the landed interest of this kingdom and it was a barbarism to consider them otherwise."⁸¹ For the first time the landed aristocracy and the planting interest had failed to see eye to eye, for the first time the West Indians were made to realize that there was a limit to the indulgence with which they were treated, and the lesson was full of portent for the future.

The absentee slave owner passed easily from the House of Commons to the House of Lords. Peerages were commonly obtained as a result of political support. There are few, if any, noble houses in England, according to a modern writer, without a West Indian strain; the best known instance is the Harewoods who, as Lascelles, were slave owners in Barbados, a member of the family sitting in the House of Commons as early as 1757.⁸² The Upper House would prove the stalwart and determined opponent of the abolition of the slave trade. The Earl of Westmorland would not hesitate to remind his peers that it was to the slave trade that they owed their seats in it,⁸³ and as late as 1804 Wilberforce would say that he feared the House of Lords.⁸⁴ It was sure instinct which made the Jamaica Assembly state categorically in 1792: "the safety of the West Indies not only depends on the slave trade not being abolished, but on a speedy declaration of the House of Lords that they will not suffer the trade to be abolished."⁸⁵ Admirals, who had won their laurels on what Nelson called "the station for honour," would be in the Upper House to use their prestige and influence in defense of the slave owners who had feted them on their holiday visits, and to testify to the good treatment of the slaves. Nelson opposed

⁸¹ R. Pares, *War and Trade in the West Indies* (Oxford, 1936), pp. 508-509.

⁸² De Thierry, *Colonials at Westminster*, p. 80.

⁸³ Parl. Deb., IX, 170, March 23, 1807.

⁸⁴ R. I. and S. Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce* (London, 1838), III, 120. To Rev. Newton, June, 1804.

⁸⁵ C. O. 137/91 (Public Record Office). *Petition of Committee of Jamaica House of Assembly on the Sugar and Slave Trade, December 5, 1792.*

abolition. Rodney, who called Jamaica "the brightest jewel in the British Diadem," to whom a temple and statue were erected in Jamaica in commemoration of his decisive victory of the Saints in 1782, wrote, when prevented in 1792 by a severe fit of the gout from attending in person the debate on Wilberforce's motion for abolition, entrusting his proxy to Lord Hawkesbury to be used against the motion.⁸⁶

The combination of planters in and out of Parliament, of merchants and of agents appointed by the islands to watch over their interests in Britain, formed the powerful West Indian interest of the eighteenth century, the rudimentary beginnings of which can be traced as far back as the reign of Charles II. Merchants and planters had frequently clashed, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, over the question of the debts of the latter to the former—an ominous sign for those who had eyes to see. There had been quarrels too between absentees and resident planters when the island assemblies had attempted to pass Deficiency Laws compelling absentees to maintain a certain proportion of whites on their plantations, but the issue was eventually decided in favor of the absentees. These differences were not permanent and mutual interests soon forced merchants, absentee and resident planters to act together. Thus was formed the Planters' Club about 1740, from which sprang the West India Committee of planters and merchants which has lasted to this day.⁸⁷ The strength of the organization, the importance of the interests involved, were to be amply illustrated in the long and fierce struggle against abolition and emancipation.

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These were the colonies which were the most precious jewels of the British Crown in the eighteenth century.

⁸⁶ *Liverpool Papers* (British Museum), *Add. Mss.* 38227, f. 202. January, 1792.

⁸⁷ Penson, *The Colonial Agents*, pp. 5, 184-189; *The London West India Interest*, pp. 374, 377-379.

Charles II, after the Restoration, had shown the importance of Barbados by creating thirteen baronets in a single day.⁸⁸ A single island, one statesman said in the middle of the seventeenth century, was worth more than the whole of New England. The Governorship of Jamaica was considered next in importance to the Lord-Lieutenancy of Ireland. It was her colonial trade, according to Chatham, which enabled Britain to pay for the Seven Years' War,⁸⁹ and the postal system made better provision for the islands than for the mainland. Without the sugar colonies the American colonies and fisheries would inevitably be doomed, British trade in Africa and British dominion of the seas would necessarily fall into the hands of the French.⁹⁰ Within the Empire everything depended on the West Indian islands.

The planters' interests took precedence over everything else. They restricted cultivation in order to ensure high prices; despite the protests of the sugar refiners nothing was done. The importance of the colonies is clearly shown by the way in which the refiners, while condemning the selfishness of the planters, were careful not to pretend to "set ourselves in competition with the inhabitants of all the sugar colonies, either for numbers, wealth, or consequence to the public."⁹¹

As far as the North American colonies were concerned, they ran second to the islands. The mainland colonies were hewers of wood and drawers of water not only to the mother country but to the West Indies. There was a mutual interdependence between the two regions. If the West Indies depended on North America for the lumber and food so vital to their plantations and slaves, and found in the mainland colonies a rapidly expanding market for their sugar and molasses which the Americans distilled into rum,

⁸⁸ *Liverpool Papers* (British Museum), *Add. Mss.* 38227, f. 202. January,

⁸⁹ De Thierry, *Distinguished West Indians in England*, p. 828.

⁹⁰ Postlethwayt, *Great Britain's Commercial Interest*, I, 546.

⁹¹ *An Account of the Late Application to Parliament from the Sugar Refiners*, pp. 3-5, 43.

the Americans, in their turn, found in the plantations the only great and permanent market for all their staples. As Professor Pitman has told us, "it was the wealth accumulated from West Indian trade which more than anything else underlay the prosperity and civilization of New England and the Middle Colonies."⁹²

So long as the West Indian consumption of lumber and provisions kept pace with North American production, all went well. But the productive resources of the mainland colonies outstripped the consumptive resources of the islands. The Americans, therefore, insisted upon free trade with the foreign sugar colonies. The American arguments were unanswerable. But the West Indians opposed free trade as incompatible with their aims and interests, despite the plea that the rum which the Americans distilled was so important an element in the purchase of the slaves on which the islands depended.

The West Indians won the day. The Molasses Act of 1733 marked the first triumph of the West Indian interest. The act was an attempt to cripple the French West Indies in so far as they traded with the American colonists. It was an astute measure designed to compel the North Americans to buy more rum and molasses from the British sugar colonies. By levying very high duties on goods imported from the foreign sugar islands, it was hoped to render impossible North American export of provisions or lumber to them, for French planters would not wish, and their government would forbid them, to pay for foreign produce in cash.

The act was a challenge to the future progress of the American colonies, and, had it been enforced, they would have suffered a severe economic setback. Nothing, however, could prevent the extensive contraband trade which began with the foreign colonies. The North Americans began to provide the French and Spanish planters with the

⁹² Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies*, pp. VII-VIII.

means of competing with their island kinsmen. They would sell their lumber and fish to the British islands for cash only, thus draining them of bullion—a nightmare to eighteenth century economists and politicians—with which they went to purchase the cheaper produce of the French islands. It might not be good patriotism, but it certainly was sound economics. Postlethwayt bitterly condemned this pernicious and licentious commerce and called for a prohibition of the importation of foreign sugar, rum and molasses into the American colonies, under penalties adequate to the offence. He computed the trade at £800,000 per annum and the freights at a further £200,000, but the damage caused to the British islands was in reality far greater than the figures suggest. Whereas the French had formerly been able to find no better use for their molasses than to give it to their hogs and horses, contact with the Americans had taught them the art of distilling; the French obtained cheaply the lumber so necessary to them, and quantities of French sugar were smuggled into Britain through American ports. Postlethwayt, too, was quick to see how these practices, to him nefarious and detestable, had “too much contributed to loosen the dependency of our colonies upon their mother-country, and have produced such connection of interests between them and those of France, as have tended to alienate them from Great Britain, and to make it too indifferent to them whether they were under a French or a British government.”⁹³

There was one way out of the dilemma. If the British sugar islands were increased the new settlements would afford the Americans new customers and deprive them of their plausible excuse for trading with the foreign colonies. Sugar was king in the eighteenth century and it was in the national interest to increase its sugar plantations. But it had always been a paramount object of the West Indians

⁹³ Postlethwayt, *Universal Dictionary*, I, 871-872, II, 769; *Great Britain's Commercial Interest*, I, 482, 485, 489-490, 493.

to oppose all such acquisitions of sugar colonies. As far back as 1667 we read of a petition from the merchants and planters of Nevis and the other Leeward Islands for separation from Barbados on the ground that the "Barbathians" thought the further settlement of the other islands detrimental to their interests.⁹⁴ Similarly Barbados had opposed the colonization of St. Lucia and had tried to prevent the cultivation of sugar in Tobago; during the war of the Austrian Succession the Speaker and Attorney-General of the colony opposed the expedition to St. Lucia, arguing that it was not to the interest of Barbados that St. Lucia should be settled; and in 1748 the Governor of Jamaica objected to an expedition to the Mosquito Shore, fearing that the reported excellence of the land there would injure Jamaica by encouraging emigration and new sugar plantations.⁹⁵ The West Indians wanted not the acquisition but the destruction of rival colonies. Thus in 1703 Admiralty instructions ordered the destruction of Guadeloupe and Martinique; in 1745 the West Indians argued in favor of the destruction rather than retention of Havana and Porto Rico;⁹⁶ and Postlethwayt bitterly regretted that Admiral Vernon had not laid Hispaniola in ashes.⁹⁷ What did it matter to the West Indians that these new colonies, entirely dependent on slave labor, would provide markets for the slave cargoes of the enterprising merchants of London, Bristol and Liverpool, or for the timber and food of the mainland? New plantations meant increased competition; they meant also increased production and importation into the home market, and consequently a reduction of price.

The classic example of the West Indian attitude towards new conquests is the controversy over the retention of Canada or Guadeloupe, itself an eloquent testimony to the amazing value and pre-eminence of the sugar islands. Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century Canada was re-

⁹⁴ Penson, *The Colonial Agents*, p. 195.

⁹⁵ Pares, *op. cit.*, pp. 199, 204, 541-542.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 179, 83.

⁹⁷ Postlethwayt, *Universal Dictionary*, II, 769.

garded as the wilderness across the Atlantic, and in 1763 it could not possibly compare with the rich and fertile Guadeloupe. But the West Indians feared a rival, Chatham, "that unfailing champion of West India causes right or wrong,"⁹⁸ sided with them, and Canada was retained. It was a clever victory for France. Postlethwayt, during the war, had realized that it was French policy to keep Britain busy on the American continent while she concentrated on the islands,⁹⁹ and Choiseul seems to have been as clearly determined to keep Guadeloupe as Pitt was to acquire Canada.¹⁰⁰ Britain had conquered too much in the war to return all the conquests, and a few smaller islands were retained in 1763, but even collectively they could not compare with Guadeloupe.

The writing was on the wall. The Act of 1733, the first instance in which an actual and express taxation of America was attempted by the British Parliament, was not opposed, except on purely commercial grounds, by the Americans, who entertained no idea that it would later be brought forward as a precedent for a regular and permanent system of taxation. What Britain had failed to accomplish in 1733 she tried to effect in 1764. The importation of foreign sugar, rum and molasses into America was practically prohibited by high duties, and it has been rightly said that this act was a greater blow to rising colonial consciousness than the Stamp Act. The attempt to render this Act effective and prevent smuggling led directly to the American Revolution. The West Indian interest was strong enough to persuade Parliament to adopt a policy which sacrificed the mainland colonies and hastened the dissolution of the whole empire.

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So long as America was British, this crazy structure, built on tyranny and oppression and the blood and sweat

⁹⁸ Pares, *op. cit.*, p. 486.

⁹⁹ Postlethwayt, *Great Britain's Commercial Interest*, I, 499.

¹⁰⁰ Pares, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

of the slaves, would remain, its goodly exterior diverting attention from its rotten and immoral interior. So long as the British planters could get their necessities cheap from America and American trade with their French rivals was prohibited, they were able to hold their own against their French competitors and devote every acre of land to sugar while the French, who had learnt the lesson of famine in the Seven Years' War, were forced to devote a substantial part of their time, labor and cultivable land to growing food for their slaves. Should America, however, be lost, should it become independent, the British colonies, deprived of their artificial support, would have to face their rivals alone, unaided.

Should this happen, how would the British planters fare? In the period of prosperity we hear louder and louder rumblings of the impending storm. As early as 1668 the Governor of Barbados declared that the soil in Barbados was worn out and the inhabitants were ready to desert their plantations. By 1724 there was no ungranted or uncultivated land. The 3,000 Negroes the island absorbed every year were demanded not by the presence of virgin soil but by the exhaustion of its land. In 1717, it needed in Barbados 150 Negroes, 50 to 60 head of cattle and 12 horses to cultivate 30 acres, whereas in the French islands it needed 30 to 40 Negroes with a few horses and cattle. In 1734 the Board of Trade represented to the House of Lords that the exhausted state of Barbados necessitated much more labor than the fresh lands of Hispaniola and other islands, and it was said that Barbados had exported no Negroes to the Spaniards since the Asiento.¹⁰¹

The great strides made by the French after the Treaty of Utrecht were regarded more and more anxiously by those interested in the British colonies. In 1734 there were bitter complaints of the progress of the French islands.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies*, pp. 7, 70-73.

¹⁰² Lecky, *op. cit.*, II, 255.

It was to the slave trade that much of this progress was due, but the fundamental reason was the superior fertility and greater extent of the French sugar islands. By the middle of the century the French were selling their sugar in the West Indies from 30 to 40 per cent cheaper than the British planters.¹⁰³ They were able, as a result, to supplant the British planters in the European markets, and the Molasses Act of 1733 is evidence of the jealousy with which the loss of the re-export trade was regarded in Britain. About two-thirds of French colonial sugar were shipped to Hamburgh, Holland and Spain,¹⁰⁴ while the British re-export trade had, according to the refiners, practically ceased, and foreign markets were being supplied with French sugar at less than half the price it was sold at in Britain.¹⁰⁵

This difference in costs of production was to be the decisive factor in the future. Even now French San Domingo was holding forth that promise of what it was to be; no colony, said Postlethwayt, was "of more high concernment" to France,¹⁰⁶ and the Governor of Jamaica wrote bluntly in 1748 that "unless French Hispaniola is ruined during the war, they will, upon a peace, ruin our sugar colonies by the quantity they will make and the low price they could afford to sell it at."¹⁰⁷ The apparently healthy man was in the grips of a slow disease; his end was only a question of time.

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But the splendor of the West Indian edifice, the wealth represented by slaves and sugar of which there was so much concrete evidence in Britain, dazzled all observers, and the flaws in the structure passed unnoticed. The maintenance of the islands and, consequently, the encouragement

¹⁰³ Postlethwayt, *Great Britain's Commercial Interest*, I, 494.

¹⁰⁴ Postlethwayt, *Universal Dictionary*, I, 869.

¹⁰⁵ *An Account of the Late Application to Parliament from the Sugar Refiners*, pp. 38, 4.

¹⁰⁶ Postlethwayt, *Universal Dictionary*, II, 769.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Pares, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

of the slave trade became the constant object of British imperial policy. Chatham made it his chief concern, and it was his proud boast that his conquests in Africa during the Seven Years' War had placed almost the entire slave trade in British hands.

The African trade, as it was politely termed in those days, met with no reprobation in official circles; it was carried on with the consent, the approbation and the assistance of the legislature. Cromwell renewed a charter to engage in the trade. Locke found it difficult to conceive that an Englishman or gentleman should plead for slavery, but others found no such difficulty. Ten years after the "glorious revolution" of 1688 the throwing open of the Royal African Company's monopoly to all British subjects testified to the popularity of the slave trade, and it was the deliberate policy of the men who had fought against tyranny at home to encourage the traffic in slaves, for cargoes of Negroes were specially exempted from the law of 1698 which exacted a certain percentage from African cargoes for the maintenance of the forts along the African coast.¹⁰⁸ Slaves meant sugar, and sugar meant wealth, and what were morality and political consistency in comparison? Similarly did the American colonists, despite the protests of Jefferson, show the world the grotesque absurdity of slave owners signing a Declaration of Independence which asserted man's inalienable rights to liberty and equality, and in 1789 the French bourgeoisie, which had flourished and still depended on the slave trade, refused to extend the Rights of Man to the "sable moiety of mankind." Slavery was apparently not incompatible with inalienable and imprescriptible rights; the loudest yelps for liberty were uttered by slave owners. Liberty, equality and the rights of man were not articles for export to the colonies, they were the monopoly of Europe and of whites, and Horace Walpole wrote in 1750 with scornful indignation of "the British

¹⁰⁸ Lecky, *op. cit.*, II, 243.

Senate, that temple of liberty, and bulwark of Protestant Christianity . . . pondering methods to make more effectual that horrid traffic of selling negroes.''¹⁰⁹

Not only did the British Government actively support the slave trade, it refused to countenance any colonial laws which prohibited or restricted the traffic. Such colonial opposition arose almost exclusively from economic and political motives, from the effect of the excessive supply upon prices and from the dangers to colonial society arising from the ever-increasing disproportion between blacks and whites. Thus were Boston representatives petitioned in 1701 in favor of emancipation, and Massachusetts in 1703 imposed a duty of £4 on every slave introduced into the colony. Britain disallowed these laws and State Governors were forbidden to assent to any laws restricting the slave trade.¹¹⁰

Jamaica revived the issue in 1773. The Assembly in that year imposed a duty on every imported slave of ten shillings, increased two months later to forty shillings, for purposes of revenue. The Board of Trade, on the representation of the merchants of London, Bristol and Liverpool, condemned the law as unjustifiable, improper and prejudicial to British commerce, pointed out that legislative autonomy in the colonies did not extend to the imposition of duties upon British ships and goods or to the prejudice and obstruction of British commerce, and warned the Governor, upon pain of removal, not to assent on any pretense to any such law in the future. In 1774, however, the Jamaican Assembly repeated its offense. In order to raise money to pay the troops, and to minimize the fear of servile rebellions, a duty of fifty shillings was imposed on every imported slave. The Governor was severely reprimanded for assenting to the law and for failing in his duty to the merchants of Britain by not stopping efforts made to "check and discourage a traffic which, however beneficial to

¹⁰⁹ Walpole, *Letters*, II, 197. To Sir H. Mann, February 25, 1750.

¹¹⁰ Lecky, *op. cit.*, II, 246-247.

the nation, is, with respect to the individuals who are engaged in it, attended with peculiar hazard and difficulty.’¹¹¹

In 1774, for the first time, the slave trade was called in question in Parliament. The bill was summarily rejected, and a similar measure the next year met with the same fate. In 1783 the Quakers took advantage of a bill before the House of Commons, prohibiting the servants of the African Committee from engaging in the slave trade, to petition against the trade in general. The *Morning Chronicle* spoke of them as the most humane religious sect in the world, while Lord North, the Prime Minister, complimented them on their humanity, but confessed that it would be almost impossible to abolish a trade which had, in some measure, become necessary to almost every nation in Europe.¹¹² In the same year the Governor of St. Vincent was instructed not to assent to any act imposing duties on Negroes imported or exported, provided the latter had not been in the island for the space of twelve months.¹¹³

When the agitation therefore for abolition of the slave trade began, slave owners and slave merchants had a strong case. “In every variation,” said their counsel before the House of Lords, “of our administration of public affairs, in every variation of parties, the policy, in respect to that trade, has been the same”; and, he added, it might well have been thought that the men of the past, if they had the common sense and feelings and justice of men, would have revolted at it, as it was then being suggested that all reasonable and virtuous persons ought to revolt.¹¹⁴ The Earl of

¹¹¹ H. of C. Sess. Pap., *Accounts and Papers*, 1795-1796. A. and P. 42, Series No. 100, Document 848, pp. 1-21. A West Indian writer, J. F. Barham, was amply justified in claiming in his *Observations on the Abolition of Negro Slavery* (London, 1823) that the first acts restricting the trade came from the colonies.

¹¹² *Parl. Hist.*, XXIII, 1026-1027, June 17, 1783.

¹¹³ C. O. 319/3, f. 37 (Public Record Office). *Instructions to Governors*, 1783-1794. The instructions were repeated in 1787 to the Governors of Grenada and Dominica as well as St. Vincent (ff. 125, 124).

¹¹⁴ *Add. Mss.* 12433, ff. 13, 19 (British Museum). Edward Law, later Lord Loughborough, May 14, 1792.

Westmorland indignantly declared that the trade had been carried on for a number of years under the ablest ministers Britain had ever seen, who had never thought of abolishing it,¹¹⁵ while the agent for Jamaica reminded the House that it ill became a member of the Parliament of a country which had pocketed the gains from the slave trade to stigmatize it as a crime.¹¹⁶

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IV. PUBLIC OPINION

Governments and statesmen think in terms of economics and national interest rather than of religion and morality. But what was the attitude of public opinion towards the greatest injustice and inhumanity ever committed by man against man? In the golden age of the slave system public opinion was not only apathetic, it was complacent.

In the first place, what of the Church? Warburton and Paley opposed the slave trade. Bishop Baxter called the slave hunters the common enemies of mankind, while Godwin looked upon the slave trade as a cruelty capable of no palliation. This was magnificent, but it was not abolition, still less emancipation. On the other hand, Jonathan Edwards, foremost among American-born theologians, left among other property a Negro boy. Bishop Berkeley, though he protested against the irrational contempt for the blacks, owned slaves when he was in Rhode Island.¹¹⁷ One of the leading churchmen of the nineteenth century, Cardinal Manning, was the son of a well-known West Indian merchant.¹¹⁸ The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel was itself a large slave owner in Barbados. It did not even convert the Negroes to Christianity. In 1783 Bishop Porteus strongly urged upon the managers of the Society the

¹¹⁵ *Parl. Deb.*, VII, 230, May 16, 1806.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, IX, 127. George Hibbert, May 16, 1807.

¹¹⁷ Lecky, *op. cit.*, II, 248.

¹¹⁸ De Thierry, *Distinguished West Indians in England*, p. 829; Ragatz, *op. cit.*, p. 51, footnote.

duty of at least giving Christian instruction to the slaves; after a full discussion the recommendation was rejected.¹¹⁹ The Moravians held slaves without hesitation. The Baptists, a church historian tells us with great delicacy, would not allow their earlier missionaries to deprecate it.¹²⁰

One of the most prominent and influential advocates of the repeal of that article of the Georgia charter which forbade slavery was George Whitefield. Whitefield was not only an advocate of slavery but was himself a slave owner. With fallacious arguments he justified slavery on scriptural grounds, and argued that though liberty was a sweet thing to such as were born free, yet slavery might not perhaps be so irksome to those who had never known the sweets of liberty. This attitude of the Church has proved very awkward to ecclesiastical historians, who try to explain it away by arguing that "conscience awoke very slowly to the appreciation of the wrongs inflicted by slavery," that "the advocacy of slavery did not then imply the same degree of moral insensibility as it would necessarily argue at the present day," and that Whitefield's mistake "simply arose from a want of delicacy of moral perception." This is pure and unadulterated nonsense. Whitefield knew it. "However this be," he concluded his arguments in favor of slavery, "it is plain to demonstration that hot countries cannot be cultivated without negroes."¹²¹

What was the attitude, however, of the Quakers, the only religious sect to oppose the slave trade before the campaign for abolition was begun in 1787? Quaker repentance was a tardy atonement for long years of participation in the iniquity, and in this repentance there were factors which destroy the idealistic and unhistorical contention that abolition was a moral victory and a virtuous page in the history of Britain.

¹¹⁹ Lecky, *op. cit.*, II, 249.

¹²⁰ G. R. Wynne, *The Church in Greater Britain* (London, 1911), p. 120.

¹²¹ C. J. Abbey and J. H. Overton, *The English Church in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1878), II, 106-107; Wynne, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

The Quakers first came into contact with slavery in the West Indies. Their attitude to it in no way differed from that of other whites. They were themselves slave owners and the dislike with which they were regarded in the islands was due not to any anti-slavery sentiments but to their pacifism and objections to service in the local militia. In the same way, Quakers in Britain and America did not hesitate to join in the lucrative slave trade. Dr. Gary has found eighty-four Quakers who were members of the Royal African Company as late as 1756, the list including such names as David and Alexander Barclay. "Slave-dealing was one of the most lucrative branches of English trade, and its prohibition would have seriously impaired the prosperity of at least one Quaker stronghold, Bristol." When in 1712 an Epistle was sent by Quakers in Pennsylvania to the London Yearly Meeting opposing the ownership of slaves without planning for their eventual liberation, the English Friends returned the evasive reply that the importation of Negroes by Friends was "not a commendable nor allowable practise."

The Quakers in America were as deeply implicated in the slave system. On the one hand, there were the slave merchants of the seaboard cities like Rhode Island, where the leading families did not scruple to engage in the slave trade. The trade provided employment for 150 vessels; it brought Rhode Island £40,000 a year which enabled the colony to purchase British goods; and the name of a slaver, "The Willing Quaker," reported from Boston at Sierra Leone as late as 1793, is ample testimony of the approval with which the traffic was regarded in American Quaker circles.

Apart from the slave merchants, there were the slave owners of the rice and tobacco plantations in the South, as dependent as the West Indies on slave labor. Here again leading Quakers closed their eyes to the incompatibility of slavery with their doctrine of the brotherhood of man. There was also a third set of Quakers, the small rural com-

munities of the North, independent of slave labor. Such Quaker opposition as there was to slavery came from these small farmers who could not compete with the large plantations run by slave labor. "It is difficult," writes Dr. Gary, "to avoid the assumption that opposition to the slave system was at first confined to groups who gained no direct advantage from it, and consequently possessed an objective attitude."

The material interests of men force them into inconsistencies and incongruities which would be ridiculous if great issues were not at stake. Thus Rhode Island Quakers, owning at best a few domestic slaves, put their principal emphasis on the necessity of manumitting slaves held by Friends, while the southern slave owners, on the other hand, threw all the onus of disapprobation on slave trading. In addition, it was the growing unprofitableness of slave labor, which was exhausting the soil, coupled with the diversion of capital into new fields, particularly in the West, which induced the Quakers of Virginia and Maryland to make slave holding a disownable offense. If in 1783 the Quakers could be complimented on their humanity, it must be emphasized that it had taken them over a century to realize the inhumanity and unchristian nature of a traffic which must have been clear from the very beginning. Economics, not religion, had determined their conversion.¹²²

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The state of public feeling in the "golden age" is illustrated in ghastly fashion by the fact that the ship in which Hawkins sailed on his second expedition to the slave coast was called "The Jesus." Hawkins was knighted for his exploits, and he took for his crest "a demi-moor in his proper colour, bound captive." John Newton's conversion did not prevent him from continuing his profitable voyages to the African coast. He reconciled his religious fervor and his

¹²² Gary, *op. cit.*, chap. V, *passim*, Appendix G; H. J. Cadbury, *Colonial Quaker Antecedents to British Abolition of Slavery* (Friends' House, London, 1933), *passim*.

economics by giving thanks in the Liverpool churches for the success of his last venture as an unbeliever and imploring God's blessing on his next, and by establishing public worship twice every Lord's Day on board of his slaver, officiating himself. He kept a day of fasting and prayer on behalf, not of the slaves, but of the crew, and he could record, amid the stench of the slave ship and the horrors of the voyage: "I never knew sweeter or more frequent hours of divine communion than in the last two voyages to Guinea."¹²³

A bill of lading for slaves was a curiosity in its way. One, dated February 1, 1766, reads: "Shipped, by the Grace of God in good order and well conditioned, by James, in and upon the good ship called the *Mary Borough*, whereof is master, under God, for this present voyage, Captain David Morton, and . . . by God's Grace bound for Georgey, in South Carolina, to say, 24 prime slaves, 6 prime women slaves." It ends with the pious wish that "God send the good ship to her desired port in safety. Amen."¹²⁴ The slaves were commonly referred to as "logs," and in a contract for 10,000 "tons" of Negroes the callousness of civilized man reached its lowest depths.

The horrors of the slave trade exceeded anything before or since in the world's history until the arrival of the concentration camp. Just as the collapse of the Mogul Empire left India exposed to the attacks and plunder of Britain and France, so the dissolution of the powerful West African Empire exposed Africa to the depredations of the slave traders. Enslavement became the penalty of more and more trivial offenses, the slave dealers fomented inter-tribal wars to obtain slaves, the best means of tribal defense was to attack neighboring tribes who were sold as slaves, and there is not the slightest room for doubt that it was the slave

¹²³ S. H. Swinny, "The Humanitarianism of the Eighteenth Century and Its Results," in F. S. Marvin (ed.), *Western Races and the World* (Oxford, 1922), pp. 126, 130-131; *Chambers's Journal*, Sixth Series, Vol. I, 1898, p. 244.

¹²⁴ *Chambers's Journal*, Sixth Series, Vol. I, 1898, pp. 243-244.

trade which produced the tribal confusion in Africa of the nineteenth century and the destruction of the civilization Africa had once known. A Quaker exhortation in 1758 attributed to the "covetous disposition" of the slave traders the "encouragement to those poor ignorant people to perpetuate their savage wars, in order to supply the demands of this unnatural traffic."¹²⁵ The abolitionists were later to admit that it was the European demand for slaves which produced the slave trade. Pitt thought it impossible to deny that it was the slave trade which produced "those dreadful enormities on that unhappy continent,"¹²⁶ and referring in 1792 to a war which had broken out on the Cameroon River, he said: "I have no more doubt that they are British arms, put into the hands of Africans, which promote universal war and desolation, than I can doubt their having done so in that individual instance."¹²⁷

Walpole once related an anecdote of the favorite black servant of some relatives of his in Jamaica who, on learning that a British ship had just been sent to the Pelew Islands, exclaimed: "Then there is an end of their happiness!" What a satire on Europe! Walpole commented.¹²⁸ As the need of slaves increased the raiders penetrated further and further inland, and the long journey to the coast was the beginning of those tribulations and miseries which culminated in the plantations of the New World. The morality of the slave traders is aptly illustrated by the tale of the slave dealer who, his money bag full of the gold paid him for his slaves, was stupid enough to accept the slave captain's invitation to dinner. He was made drunk and awoke next morning to find his money gone and himself stripped,

¹²⁵ Gary, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

¹²⁶ *Parl. Deb.*, XXIX, p. 342, April 19, 1791.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1150, April 2, 1792. Of 2,700,000 tons of gunpowder exported from Britain in one year, half went to Africa. The firearms were exported, as William Smith, an abolitionist, gibed, "for the purposes doubtless of maintaining peace and encouraging civilization among its various tribes." *Ibid.*, p. 320, April 19, 1791.

¹²⁸ Walpole, *Letters*, IX, 157. To the Countess of Ossory, October 19, 1788.

branded and associated with his own victims, to the great mirth of the sailors.¹²⁹

The slave ship was a concentration of misery. An officer in the trade once said that "one real view, one minute absolutely spent in the slave rooms on the middle passage would do more for the cause of humanity than the pen of a Robertson, or the whole collective eloquence of the British Senate."¹³⁰ The unfortunate slaves had to face all the terrors of a long voyage over the sea. The men were chained two by two, right leg and left leg, right hand and left hand; but the women were spared this, hence perhaps the reason why the proportion of deaths among the males was double that among the females. Some who went below in the evening in apparent good health were found dead in the morning. Often a dead and a living man were chained together. The slaves were packed spoonways, one on another, so that each man had less room than a man in a coffin. They were sullen, dejected and often rebellious. To take them on deck to make them dance afforded them an opportunity of throwing themselves overboard. Anticipating Gandhi and the suffragettes, they refused to eat, and a common sight in the windows of Liverpool shops was a steel appliance for forcing the mouth open and holding the tongue down until nourishment could be poured down the throat.¹³¹ The mortality on the Middle Passage was seventeen times the mortality in ordinary life. Arrived in the West Indies, the Negroes, trembling like leaves, were exposed for sale, prospective buyers receiving and handling them as a butcher handles the cattle he is about to purchase for slaughter. Refuse slaves were sold by auction, and in one instance, with rare magnanimity, a blind Negro was given away.¹³²

Were these horrors unknown? Did it need a parliamentary inquiry to make them public? Were the men of the

¹²⁹ R. Muir, *A History of Liverpool* (London, 1907), p. 197.

¹³⁰ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 586.

¹³¹ Muir, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

¹³² Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 592.

early eighteenth century, the men before 1783, worse than the men of 1783? The idea is fantastic. It is clear that so long as the slave trade and the slave system were profitable and vital to the national economy, these evils were tolerated as inevitable or even totally ignored. Queen Elizabeth naively tried to salve her conscience by expressing her anxiety lest the Negroes should be carried off without their free consent, which "would be detestable and call down the vengeance of Heaven upon the undertakers." The slave merchants knew that no thunderbolts would fall. The abolitionists had later to face the fact that worthy men, fathers of families and excellent citizens, had been most active in this reprehensible traffic. Ramsay tried to square the circle. He acknowledged it with real sorrow, but he could only say that "they had never examined the nature of this commerce and went into it, and acted as others had done before them in it, as a thing of course, for which no account was to be given in this world or the next."¹³³

This was sublime nonsense. The trade was profitable and in general that was the end of it. Some did, however, consider the nature of the traffic. Many people, wrote Postlethwayt, were prejudiced against the trade, thinking it barbarous, inhuman and unlawful for a Christian country to trade in blacks. But he assured his readers that the slaves were treated with great leniency and humanity; that the slave trade was a humanitarian method of disposing of prisoners of war who would otherwise be tortured and massacred; and in any case the servitude of the Negroes was not less tolerable than that of miners and colliers in Christian countries.¹³⁴ Boswell put it more poetically: to abolish the slave trade would be extreme cruelty to the African savages, it would be to "shut the gates of mercy on mankind";

¹³³ J. Ramsay, *A Manuscript Volume*, entirely in his own hand, mainly concerned with his activities towards the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1787 (Rhodes House, Oxford), f. 65. "An Address on the Proposed Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade."

¹³⁴ Postlethwayt, *The National and Private Advantages*, pp. 4-5.

and Earl St. Vincent would later assure the House of Lords that life on the plantations was for the Negro a veritable paradise as compared with his existence in Africa.¹³⁵

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Slavery in the eighteenth century was not something that the Englishman merely heard or read of. It was there under his very eyes. A Westminster goldsmith made "silver padlocks for blacks and dogs."¹³⁶ Busts of blackamoors and elephants, emblematical of the slave trade, adorned the Liverpool Town Hall. The insignia of the slave traders were boldly exhibited for sale in the shops and warehouses and advertised in the papers. Slaves were occasionally sold by auction in the shops, warehouses and coffee-houses, and also on the steps of the Custom House. The young bloods of the town found in the circulation of handbills advertising women for sale a pleasant change from other pursuits.¹³⁷ A resident of Holborn paired for sale "a chestnut gelding, and a well-made good-tempered black boy."¹³⁸

Negroes were no uncommon sight in Britain in the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century. Little black boys as pages or playthings were favorite appendages of fashionable ladies or women of easy virtue. Negro servants were common. There was little race or color prejudice against them. One Ignatius Sancho, butler of the Duke of Montague, became a grocer and a well-known London character and was painted by Gainsborough. Negroes became conspicuous among London beggars and were known as St. Giles blackbirds. So numerous were they that a parliamentary committee was set up in 1786 for relieving the black poor.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ *Parl. Deb.*, VIII, 669, February 2, 1807.

¹³⁶ Swinny, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

¹³⁷ Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 473-474.

¹³⁸ Botsford, *op. cit.*, p. 333, quoting advertisement in *The London Gazette*, April 18, 1769.

¹³⁹ M. D. George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1925), pp. 137-138.

The custom of bringing blacks to Britain was opposed on the ground that it was inhuman to the blacks themselves to bring them to a free country, and experience proved that when taken back to the plantations they were the chief instigators of insurrection.¹⁴⁰ It was not clear whether slavery was recognized by the law of Britain, and whether baptism made the slaves free. In 1729, however, the West Indians secured a verdict in their favor; neither residence in Britain nor baptism could affect the master's right and property in his slave. This decision, confirmed in 1749, was challenged by Granville Sharp in the memorable test case of the slave Somerset in 1772. Chief Justice Mansfield tried desperately to avoid giving a judgment but eventually was forced, reluctantly, to admit that slavery was not approved or allowed by the law of Britain.

This was an important decision, but it was not much. It concerned not merely a single Negro, as Benjamin Franklin unfairly said, but 14,000 or 15,000 slaves in Britain, estimated at £700,000. But the judgment will not bear the interpretation put on it by people constantly seeking for moral successes. It was limited to the question of forcibly retaining possession of a slave in Britain only, and there is nothing to support Professor Coupland's contention that behind the legal judgment lay the moral judgment and that the Somerset case marked the beginning of the end of slavery throughout the British Empire.¹⁴¹ Franklin poured withering scorn on the hypocrisy of a nation which prided itself on its virtue and the equity of its courts by setting free a single Negro, while it promoted laws for encouraging the slave trade. Where was the moral judgment passed on the slave trade when the Jamaica Acts were disallowed, or when Lord North rejected the Quaker petition?

The judgment, too, was soon seen in its true light. In

¹⁴⁰ M. D. George, *London Life etc.*, p. 135.

¹⁴¹ R. Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London, 1933), pp. 55-56.

1781 the case of the ship "Zong" was argued in the Court of King's Bench. Short of water, the captain had thrown 132 slaves overboard, and now brought an action for insurance, alleging that the loss of the slaves fell within the clause of the policy which insured against "perils of the sea." Not only did the Court find for the plaintiff, awarding damages of £30 for each slave, but there was not the slightest attempt to instigate criminal proceedings against the captain and crew for the wholesale homicide. It was no more, said the same Mansfield, than throwing horses overboard. But the society for the prevention of cruelty to animals did not yet exist.

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The eighteenth century was as noted for its philanthropy as any other age, and the West Indian and slave merchants as forward as other men. Henry Hoare left £2,000 to charity schools and workhouses, and another £2,000 for distribution of bibles and prayer-books, besides several smaller amounts for various benevolent purposes. David Barclay founded a House of Industry, which he eventually made self-supporting. Blundell, the Cunliffes, the Earles and Heywoods all contributed to the Liverpool Infirmary, of which Foster Cunliffe was treasurer. It was the slaves who enabled Christopher Codrington to endow the college in Barbados which still bears his name and to leave £10,000 and his valuable collection of books worth £6,000 to All Souls, Oxford. None of these men found in their philanthropy any argument against the slave system, and Bentley was unique among Liverpool merchants in his reprobation of the slave trade. Pure philanthropy was very well in its way, but philanthropy plus thirty per cent was very much better.

This is not to say that no voices were raised against the slave system. Defoe condemned it strongly, and Aphra Benn's "Oronooko," for the first time since Othello, had a black as hero. Poets like Pope, Thomson, Shenstone, Savage, Cowper, historians like Robertson, economists like

Adam Smith and Dean Tucker, all opposed the slave system. Walpole condemned it. Dr. Johnson deeply abhorred the evil. In fact, he was an early anti-imperialist; on hearing of Clive's suicide he merely expressed surprise that remorse had not driven him to it long before; and on one memorable occasion he shocked some Oxford dons by drinking gravely to the next slave insurrection in the West Indies. But what did all these humanitarian protests effect? Absolutely nothing, as far as the slaves were concerned.

I pity them greatly, but I must be mum,
For how could we do without sugar and rum?

Postlethwayt was well aware of the excesses of the slave trade, its disastrous effects on Africa, and the limitless possibilities of a more legitimate commerce. But objections, he knew, would be of little weight with statesmen who saw the great national emoluments which accrued from the slave trade to Britain's rivals. He himself professed that he heartily disliked the slave trade which, he thought, could be abolished without injury to the plantations. But they must take things as they were; his hints might possibly sometime or other rouse some noble and benevolent Christian spirit to think of changing the whole system of the slave trade, a change which, as matters then stood, might not be so easily accomplished.¹⁴²

Postlethwayt was right. Were not Johnson and Defoe, Warburton and Cowper noble and benevolent Christian spirits? It cannot be too often emphasized that, while the slave system was profitable, not only were the sentimentalists a few isolated voices crying in the wilderness, but that they were, in the nature of things, ineffective. Slavery was originally established on economic not moral or religious grounds, whatever the arguments subsequently used to justify it. An economic system is overthrown only when it ceases to function. Economics, not humanity or morality,

¹⁴² Postlethwayt, *The National and Private Advantages*, p. 5; *Universal Dictionary*, I, 25; *Great Britain's Commercial Interest*, II, 217-218.

would be the decisive factor, for was the slave system ever humane or moral? It was only the superior profits, Adam Smith held, which arose from sugar and tobacco cultivation which justified slavery.¹⁴³ The slave trade, as Dean Tucker recognized, was never likely to be suppressed until it was proved that slavery was economically wasteful and that sugar could be produced more cheaply by free labor.¹⁴⁴ When the slave system ceased to be profitable, tears would be shed for the poor suffering blacks; the Negro, until then a species of orang-outang, a quadruped devoid of rights or reason, would be recognized not merely as a man but as a brother; humanity and Christianity would belatedly inherit their kingdom; and the denunciation of the slave trade would rise to a veritable crescendo and permit intellectual eunuchs of later generations to beat their breasts and give their country credit for putting an end to a system in which it had outstripped all others.

ERIC WILLIAMS

¹⁴³ Adam Smith, *op. cit.*, III, 89.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Lecky, *op. cit.*, VII, 362.